

Supplement to North Slope Areawide Best Interest Finding

July 24, 2002

Use of Gravel Roads for Exploration

Exploration operations are conducted on the coastal plain of the North Slope during winter using ice roads for access and ice pads as drilling platforms to minimize impacts of fill in wetland areas. The southern portion of the North Slope Areawide lease sale area, in contrast to the coastal plain, is an area of greater topographic relief with well-developed drainage, ridges, exposed outcrops, and few lakes. This system of ridges and valleys may, in some circumstances, make access to exploration sites problematic. The main challenge is the topographic grade. This could create a potentially unacceptable and unsafe operating condition that could be addressed by allowing the use of gravel to construct portions of an access road system.

Even with this general knowledge of surface conditions in the foothills region, at the time it issued the final finding for Lease Sale 87 North Slope Areawide on March 17, 1998, the department considered it highly unlikely that any exploration would be proposed that required the use of gravel. Moreover, the department had no specific information, and no anticipation of information, that would lead it to consider the use of gravel for any exploration road construction. In the finding the department stated that permanent roads “may not be used for exploration and activities must be supported by air service or an existing road system,” meaning that gravel roads would generally be prohibited.

Since the final finding however, the department has become aware that, in the southern portion of the sale area, in certain limited circumstances, a gravel road or pad could be the only feasible and prudent alternative to conduct certain exploration activities. Under Mitigation Measure 2, “...exploration activities must be supported only by ice roads, winter trails, existing road systems or air service. Exceptions may be granted by the Director of the DMLW, and the Director, if an emergency condition exists,...”. Measure 6 states that, “Exploration facilities must be temporary and must be constructed of ice unless the Director determines that no feasible or prudent alternative exists.”

Since the exception language in Measure 2 never excluded the use of gravel (even though its use has been discouraged), the department is clarifying that, with respect to leases issued pursuant to the North Slope Areawide 2002 sale, gravel roads and pads may be allowed for exploration in certain limited and site-specific circumstances, in the area described in Mitigation Measure 2 and shown on the map attached to this decision. This exception may be granted on a case-by-case basis, when no feasible and prudent alternatives exist. When submitting a plan of operations for approval, lessees will be required to justify the request by clearly demonstrating that such need exists, and the

department will issue approval only after consultation with the Department of Fish and Game. The change to Measure 6 simply clarifies that exploration roads and pads are considered to be facilities.

Amendments to Mitigation Measures 2 and 6 (in bold)

Mitigation Measure 2

- Except for approved off-road travel, exploration activities must be supported only by ice roads, winter trails, existing road systems or air service. Wintertime off-road travel across tundra and wetlands may be approved in areas where snow and frost depths are sufficient to protect the ground surface. Summertime off-road travel across tundra and wetlands may be authorized subject to time periods and vehicle types approved by DMLW. Exceptions may be granted by the director of the DMLW, and the Director, if an emergency condition exists; or, if it is determined, after consulting with ADF&G, that travel can be accomplished without damaging vegetation or the ground surface. **Exceptions, including the use of gravel, may also be granted on a site specific basis, if it is determined, after consulting with ADF&G and DMLW, that no feasible and prudent alternatives exist for constructing an exploration road or pad in the area south of the boundary described below:**

Beginning at the NPR-A boundary, from the northeast corner of T 1N, R 2E,

- **east to the northwest corner of T 1N, R 9E, then**
- **north to the northwest corner of T 4N, R 9E, then**
- **east to the northwest corner of T 4N, R 23E, then**
- **south to the southwest corner of T 4N, R 23E, and then**
- **east along the top of T 3N to the ANWR boundary.**

Mitigation Measure 6

- Exploration facilities, **including exploration roads and pads**, must be temporary and must be constructed of ice unless the Director determines that no feasible and prudent alternative exists. Re-use of abandoned gravel structures may be permitted on a case-by-case basis by the Director, after consultation with the director, DMLW, and ADF&G. Approval for use of abandoned structures will depend on the extent and method of restoration needed to return these structures to a usable condition.

